



A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF ANNIE ZAIDI'S FICTION 'GULAB'

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ABSTRACT

Annie Zaidi caught attention towards herself when she won Nine Dots Award in May 2019 for addressing contemporary issue of the world. She herself admits-

"What really appealed to me about the Nine Dots Prize was the way it encourages entrants to think without borders or restraints. ... The Prize will allow me to dedicate time to the examination of this question, which is of critical importance in the modern world."

Annie Zaidi's Gulab is a 'weird love story. Annie Zaidi stretches the love to encompass different cultures and religions. Arguably the inter-faith love relationship appears to be difficult to maintain but not impossible to imagine. Gulab showcases the trials and tribulations and also bliss of inter-religion relationship. Zaidi perceives love crossing the boundary of even life. Written in English, Zaidi doesn't hold back mixing in Hindi and Urdu words and phrases like 'Saira's Bahraich-wali khala', 'such a tamasha', and 'all sorts of dhaandli.' These words provide linguistic and cultural richness to Gulab. This paper aims to record the cultural landscape of Gulab along with the dynamics of inter-faith relationship. The landscape of Gulab is one that is recognizable easily to a wide audience.

In short, we may say that the novel is brilliant not only because it is 'about culturalism and Inter-faith relationship, about love and possession' but also because of its great lucidity originating in the simple and casual mix of language to explore live affair spanning two worlds. The paper also attempts to examine the rational for a great bond between the author and the reader. _

KEYWORDS: Socio-cultural, Inter-faith, Love-relationship, Culturalism, Contemporary Indian Women.

This paper tries to discover the extent of culture, love, possession and Inter-faith in Annie Zaidi's Gulab (2014). Annie zaidi is a very keen observer of her society and her writings are dominated by a strong sense of social issues and justice. She is very much aware of Indian society and about various problems which is associated with India's democratic process, it's bureaucracy and infrastructure, it's cultural and Inter-faith issues. She is very much interested in the various problems faced by women at each and every steps of their life and career. In her essay 'Embodying Venus' she raised various questions about meaning of women empowerment and unashamed of their bodies.

Annie zaidi caught attention when she won Nine Dots Award in May 2019, a prestigious book prize created to award innovative thinking for addressing contemporary issue of the world. The winner of Nine Dots Prize is encouraged to develop their response into a full-length book which is to be published by Cambridge University Press. With this award she earned US \$ 100,000 financial award for her entry 'Bread, Cement, Cactus', combines memoirs and reportage to explore concepts of home and belonging rooted in her experiences of contemporary life in India. She herself admits-

"My work has often crossed over genres, traversing between memoir and journalism, and this timely but wide-open question encouraged us to approach it with methods that were equally far-ranging. I had been working towards a similarly themed project for a while but didn't have the financial, or even mental, bandwidth to do it justice. ... I'm extremely grateful for this opportunity and am looking forward to the challenges and excitement of the year ahead."

Annie Zaidi is one of those rare contemporary writers who has tried her hand at different formats and various styles. When someone has experimented with so many forms of writing, does it require compartmentalising the brain to focus differently on each? This is the question asked to her in an interview. She said "There are no mental compartments. Now that I write for a living, I have to only decide the form based on who I'm writing for and how much space I can take up. At a creative level, I just have to decide what the thing I'm thinking wants to be. Sometimes, a line comes to me and I know instinctively it belongs to a poem. Sometimes an image crops up and I have to choose between drama, film, and short fiction. Sometimes I begin writing a script and then decide to turn it into short fiction instead."

She has written essays, poetry, fiction of different length, memoirs and also written several play scripts that have been performed on the stage, and a handful of short films that can be watch on YouTube. She has authored Known Turf: Bantering with Bandits and other True Tales in 2010, a collection of essays shortlisted for the prestigious Vodafone Crossword Book Award (2011). She is the co-author of The Bad Boys' Guide to the Good Indian Girl (2014), a series of poem, Crush (2007) which was jointly published with Gynell Alves. A collection of shorts

story, Love Stories # 1 to 14 and Sleep Tight were published in 2012 and 2013 respectively. She published two novels which are Gulab in 2014 and A Prelude to a Riot in 2019. She also published a memoir, Bread, Cement, Cactus in 2020. Her work has appeared in various anthologies, including Mumbai Noir; Women Changing India, India Shining, India Changing, and Literary journals like The little Magazine, Pratilipi, Out of Print, and The Missing Slate.

There is a sort of irreverent, camp and honest look at society, love, possession and Inter-faith in Zaidi's Gulab. Zaidi discards the idea of the standard romantic hero entirely, each one of the men she has created in Gulab are emotionally stunted and too caught up with the idea of love to truly understand the object of their affection, the mysterious Saira, whether they know her as Gulab or Mumtaz. Zaidi explains, 'I was thinking of how much we really know about someone, even if we think we love them, and how invested anyone can be in the desires of the beloved. Especially if those are desires not fulfilled by oneself.' As much as Gulab works as a ghost story, Zaidi said she hadn't approached the narrative with that in mind, rather, she approached it as a 'weird love story, maybe with a bit of atmosphere, a thriller element tossed in but that she does have 'some questions about the notion of the supernatural narrative.'

The strong-willed Zaidi derives much pleasure in writing, a relationship that seems to be only blossoming. She says "It's all about having an idea and being able to tease it out, lay it down into the shape of something new." According to her 'Civilisation is built on the back of language and the arts. But everything that really matters to humans, their sense of self, their complex systems of education, of law, of power-mongering – all of it is based on the writing down of ideas. We are who we think we are, depending on what story has been told to us.'

Gulab starts with a very unlikely romantic hero, the lead protagonist Nikunj is a sweaty, whiny man packed tight in a formal suit while attempting to say goodbye to the true love of his life, Saira, a Muslim woman. Having assumed she had died in an earthquake many years ago when the building she lived in collapsed, Nikunj is shocked when he receives a telegram informing him of her death and burial.

Even though he is now married and settled, he has fantasised about finding her alive many times and two young lovers had been waiting for the 'right' time to tell their parents of their decision to get married for years, until 'the earth itself took away all the options' and Saira vanished.

Decades later, a much older Nikunj finds himself in a graveyard, telegram clutched in sticky paw, trying to locate Saira's grave, as he sweats and stumbles around the place. He meets two men there, Usman and Parmod, who both insist that Saira's grave is actually that of their deceased wives, Gulab and Mumtaz respectively. Neither of the other men can understand why someone would place an incorrect gravestone over their wives' graves, neither can understand why the

grave is marked with a much earlier date than their wives' deaths. Nikunj is equally confused because Saira's grave is not fresh it seems like she died and was buried years ago, why was he sent a telegram now? Who sent it? He has nothing to say to either of the other men and all three grieve in their own ways, lamenting the loss of the woman whom they loved more than life itself or so they say. And Nikunj tries to find the answer, and in the process of finding answer, he finds himself.

A mysterious woman in a burqa enters this melee, planting flowers on the same grave. She won't let any of the men stop her and seems to know more than they do: 'Nothing in that moment seemed real. There was something caricature-like about it. As if this entire scene was a crayon drawing in a child's sketchbook.' She tells the men that none of them truly understand what has happened and while we agree with her, we don't really understand either. The actual ghost in this story, that of Saira, appears very little and just towards the very end, even though the central figure in the novella is the dead woman. There are very few other characters in the book.

What is truly horrific about the ghost is her abject desperation to have what she cannot have in a way. In other words, what's horrific about most ghosts is their refusal to leave, and refusal to accept that this life is over. Except this one's desperation is strong enough for her to take a physical mantle for a sort of second and third attempt at life. When Nikunj expresses further confusion, a gravedigger, bare chested in his checked lungi who appears to be the only one in the ghost logic tells him, 'but the dead are people, Saab. What did you think? Do people stop being people afterwards?' It is then that Nikunj understands: 'Dead people slurping chai, or sniffing the air when they walk past a cake shop, this should be a natural idea then. And the idea that they might desire a beautiful body, that their desire should be so intense that they wanted to possess a body, own it, swallow it whole, become it, why did this seem like such an unnatural idea?'

Zaidi has fun with Nikunj, she created him a serious as well as a funny guy. 'I am an emotional type of man. I will be the first to admit it.' He tells us at the very start, immediately contradicting himself with 'But I do not cry easily. Only in movie halls. There, I cry freely. But that afternoon, I was ready to cry out of sheer nervousness.' When unable to physically get about without losing his breath, he admits, 'I was sure to die of clotted arteries or something else that sounds lazy, making it seem as if I deserved to die.' He's even insecure about Usman having a full head of hair, telling us 'This loss of hair is a terrible loss. It takes away so many things. Your confidence goes down. Young girls who are only five-six years your junior start calling you 'uncle'. Your worth in the marriage market also goes down.' It's not just amusing, it's refreshing.

Nikunj really is a bit of a disaster, far from the sort of machismo-filled, testosterone driven romantic hero you'd usually find in a thriller or even a ghost story, he's basically a fumbling, bumbling spoilt man-child, following society's rules with no thought to other possibilities. Zaidi points out that this was all very much intended in an attempt to break away from clichés: 'I don't like the idea of all protagonists being young and/or attractive, for one', she says, 'besides, a middle-aged businessman ought to look, feel, behave, talk like himself. You see men like that, don't you? Deeply romantic, yet also somehow pragmatic, still carrying around some lost love's memory, but often bowing to social mores. I wanted such a man as my central protagonist.'

Zaidi recreates the eerie atmosphere of the spirit world convincingly. "If they hear your voice and they notice there is no human recipient for our words, they believe that you need someone to talk to. So they respond," says one of the characters, Usman, warning Nikunj against talking to himself. The general air of spookiness is helped along by Yasmin Zaidi's disturbing pen and ink illustrations, which effortlessly conjure up pouring rain, lonely roads, and haunted trees. The black and white cover, in particular, is stunning; you could almost hang it on the wall. There's also some wry, unobtrusive humour. All three men worship their wives or girlfriends, and go on at length about how "beautiful" and "simple" they were. Says boastful marble dealer Parmod of his efforts to please his wife: "Everything in the house was pure, quality marble. All the little things, coasters, her dressing table, combs, the bed with its carved back." Thinks Nikunj: "She must have felt smothered by marble, as if she was buried while still breathing. I wouldn't be surprised if she came back to haunt Parmod." "One can't help but feel that Zaidi is slyly skewering the way Indian men create a sanitised image of what they would like their wives to be: beautiful, 'homely', with no eyes for anyone but their husbands. In one passage, Nikunj says as much. "I never asked her what she wanted from life. I assumed she wanted me." In the end, the truth comes as a macabre surprise. The ending of the novel does not disappoint and encapsulates the complexity of a love affair between the people's of different Inter-faith and that spans two worlds.

Gulab also features a fun, casual mix of languages. Written in English, Zaidi doesn't hold back with mixing in Hindi and Urdu words and phrases when she feels like it. It's a confident organic mix that serves her well: the unconcerned use of phrases like 'Saira's Bahraich-wali khala', 'such a tamasha', 'all sorts of dhaandli' add to what is a very contemporary attitude in many young urban writers from the subcontinent who choose to write in the mix in which they speak. 'South Asia is so diverse,' says Zaidi, 'both linguistically and culturally that If I began to think about dialects etc, I would confound readers even between Lucknow and

Mumbai. Besides, every book has its own cultural landscape'. The landscape of Gulab is one that is recognisable easily to a wide audience and that Zaidi has not felt the pressure to alter her narrative style in the hope of reaching a larger audience says a great deal for her. She seems to be saying that let everyone else catch up to the subcontinent's style, because the subcontinent has plenty of it.

To conclude, we may say that the novel is brilliant not only because it is 'about culturalism and Inter-faith, about love and possession' but also because of its great lucidity triggered by Annie Zaidi's use of simple and casual mix of language to bring her characteristically clear-eyed exploration of live affair that spans two worlds and to portray hair-raising ghost story. Besides, every book has its own cultural landscape'. The landscape of Gulab is one that is recognisable easily to a wide audience and develops a great bond between the author and the reader. In addition, Annie Zaidi's sincere effort to make the novel realistic also makes the text highly lucid and readable. Besides, Zaidi's interests in social, and psychological issues also make this work (Gulab) great and worth reading.

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